

Sunday, September 4 2022 Pentecost 13 *“Jonah and the Big Fish”*

Matthew 12:38-42 Jonah

Jonah and the Big Fish is our focus today as we continue in our Summer Worship Series of “At Your Request”. We will conclude this series next week with the focus being “Stepping into the Post Pandemic Christian Church”. What is it about the story of Jonah that causes us to smile, reflect and just enjoy this story about a man who tries to run from God? Maybe just maybe we see ourselves in this faithful person who tries to run but is caught and held captive by God’s Spirit to tell others the good news!

What might we learn from this ‘fish tale’ that reminds us that we are all called to serve God? Jonah is called by God directly. God says, “Go at once to Nineveh that great city and cry out—shout out to the people to repent and turn from their wicked ways.” If they don’t God would destroy the city. Jonah’s purpose was clear. He was to be the voice telling the people to turn from their evil ways and live as God wanted them. But Jonah did not want to go. He set out to flee from God’s presence. He was trying to hide from God because he did not want to do what God called him to do.

Just think for a moment. God calls us each to serve in a different number of ways based upon our gifts and abilities. God saw in Jonah his ability to change people’s way of behaviour by having him speak to them about his faith. Yet Jonah tried to hide from God by fleeing the area and getting away by sailing on a cargo ship. He is on the boat bound for Tarshish where he is resting. The ship is in a terrible storm and in order to keep it afloat the crew starts to empty the cargo into the sea. This was a big deal- for the purpose of this ship is transporting cargo from one port to another and now they are dumping what brings in the money to the captain. But they do not see any other way to safely travel across the sea and return home. While on the ship, we read that the crew members each prayed to their god as they are desperately trying to stay afloat.

Jonah is sleeping in the hull of the ship when the crew asks him to get up. They question who he is and then they ask him to pray to his god. Jonah realizes what has happened- because he fled from God, God still followed. Jonah knows that in order to save the crew and the ship he

must be thrown overboard. They also want to know more about him before they throw him over as they do not wish to be charged with murdering a passenger. Jonah tells them about his faith, and as soon as Jonah is off the ship, the waters are calm and they are safe. We do not know the fate of these crewmen and their relationship with God, but Jonah did tell them about the faith he had.

God didn't forget about Jonah's safety and well-being. He provided a big fish to swallow Jonah and keep him from drowning. There have been many interpretations of this part of the story. It is considered to be a big fish because most whales do not have a digestive system which would support swallowing a whole man. Another idea is that after Jonah was thrown overboard, he had drifted for a long time with the movement of water and eventually landed on shore which was close to caves. This where he stayed for three days. The third idea is that because of the heat of the day, the salt water in his system, and no food, Jonah was hallucinating about his experience and had fainted not really sure of where he was. But what is essential in this fish story is that while away from home, in the sea or in the fish, Jonah has time to think and reflect on his life and whether it is worth living. He was a Hebrew and he worshiped the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land. He shared this with the crew of the ship and he came to a new understanding in his relationship with God. He sought God's forgiveness in his pray of thanksgiving. Through his confession God delivered him by having Jonah spewed or vomited out of the big fish onto dry land.

Jonah is set free from captivity and able to return home. God then calls to him again and having had a fish story experience, Jonah doesn't hesitate to do what God asks. What is it that Jonah supposed to do? One of the toughest yet most important things that one person can do. That is, to assist others in telling them about their future without God and the need to repent or confess sins and then receive God's grace.

Jonah sets out to Nineveh following God's plan. Jonah does his job well and calls the people to confession. They respond and start wearing sack cloths as a sign of confession and repentance. Jonah has warned them what is going to happen and they responded. Because the people turn back to God, the city is spared of God's destruction due to wickedness. All is made

new and the people are forgiven. This should have ended the story of Jonah here because he had done a great job, but it does not because Jonah is angry. He is angry at God.

Just think for a moment now. Jonah fled from God, was caught, thrown overboard to save others and he himself was saved by living in a big fish for three days and nights. All because he did not do what God had asked. Eventually Jonah does what God wants in Nineveh and the people are saved but Jonah is angry. He expected the people to give him more resistance and yet his anger is directed at God because not everyone comes to faith in God in circumstances that seem easy.

Have you ever been called to do something God wanted you to do and you resisted or talked yourself out of doing this because it was not convenient, just didn't want to or did not see the value in it?

For some people, these past couple of years might be compared to time being spent inside the belly of a big fish. God called people to come and serve him in different ways. But like Jonah, many people were held captive within the belly of a big fish as they could not get out or do what God wanted. This was a time to reflect and give thanks for the circumstances they found themselves in as they world was put in lockdown due to a virus. People were waiting for vaccines, and just waiting to see what would happen next.

Jonah came to his senses inside the fish; he prayed words of thanksgiving to God. Jesus spoke about Jonah's experience inside the fish and compared it to the time he would and did spend in the heart of the earth- dead and buried. But there is hope for while Jonah waited, God enabled the fish to sneeze and vomit him out and onto a beach to safety. And for Jesus, after his death and burial, he rose from death. Jesus' resurrection made a difference in people's lives because there is new life in Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Jonah had to wait. He was a firm believer in God's grace and mercy, and his abounding love. But his effort was too simple to be recognized by God. He was angry as to what happened at Nineveh and hoped that his running away was worth it.

This weekend Disney+ will release its latest live action movie based upon the classic 1940 animated production, Pinocchio starring Tom Hanks. If you recall this story, Geppetto is a toy maker who desires to have a son. He makes a marionette out of wood and hopes that this toy will be granted life. The Blue Fairy enters the story and grants this desire with conditions. There are different villains which try to prevent Pinocchio to become a real boy and there are also challenges. But what is key in this story is that it is because of Pinocchio's disobedience to his creator Geppetto. Geppetto faces a Jonah time in the belly of a whale. Geppetto finds himself in the belly of Monstro as Pinocchio searches for his identity as a real boy and his father. At one point Pinocchio sees Geppetto inside Monstro fishing and wants him to know that he is there to rescue him. Monstro then sucks in a school of fish along with Pinocchio and it is there father and son unite. They apologize and make up for their disobedience to each other. Pinocchio lights a fire to make the whale sneeze and they escape.

But what are the implications and teachings from Jonah's experience in the big fish? And why is this fish tale story so important to the story of Pinocchio? Why was Jonah so angry at God? Nineveh was saved but was his effort not seen as it could have been? Was he just not clear about his relationship with God and the choices he did and should have made?

Jonah runs away, is caught and experiences captivity. Geppetto is also caught as he struggles with his desire to have a son and he too experiences captivity. Jonah prays to God and gives him thanks for the opportunity to reach others and to have them turn away from evil.

Pinocchio and Geppetto eventually are released and what they learn is that they are to be brave and truthful. They are to also let their conscience guide them and they would live a good life.

Jonah was brave as he told the ship's crew of his relationship with God. He knew that the ship would sink if he stayed aboard. But the crew was afraid and came to know Jonah's God as they did not want to be accused of murder. Jonah was saved because God had a task for him to do; we too have tasks to do. One of the most important in modern faith and churches, to tell the good news of Jesus. To tell others of Jesus' death and burial which brings to us the great news of resurrection and salvation for all. With Jesus' resurrection we need not fear the belly of

fish, or being captive, we desire to be under God's caring eyes and hands and we search only for the need to get out of the darkness of the fish belly and share the hope that comes in knowing Jesus.

Are we ready to do this? As we emerge from the pandemic, we need to be cautious and hopeful. We need also to be strong in our faith, to tell others of the joy in knowing Jesus and mostly, state that is it God whom you follow as you walk forward in faith. We are called to be brave and truthful for it is by faith in God that we can share His story with others.

This is the good news Jesus taught his disciples. And it is the good news we as Christians believe to day and into post pandemic church.

Let us pray.

God of grace we thank you for the story of Jonah- filled with humour, possibilities and impossibilities. We thank you for the time of prayer that Jonah had and that we are asked to do each day so that our lives may be enriched and our faith increased and made strong.

Bless us we pray as we seek your guidance and strength. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.